DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 249 638 EA 017 204

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TITLE Talk to the National School Transportation Association.
PUB DATE 16 Jul 84
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National School Transportation Association (20th, Anchorage, AK, July 15-18, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accident Prevention; *Discipline; *Driver Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *School Buses; School Personnel; *Student Behavior; *Student Transportation; Training
IDENTIFIERS *Bus Drivers

ABSTRACT

From observations during an investigation of children's behaviors on school buses, two general points seem important. First, current selection and training procedures for bus drivers generally ignore issues of pupil management. Second, focusing on pupil management issues in the selection, training, and supervision of drivers can have a number of beneficial effects for a company. These include an increase in pupil satisfaction and a decrease in vandalism, accidents, driver turnover, injury, liability, and insurance costs. Proper attention to driver training can give a company a significant competitive advantage in competing for contracts. Keeping good employees around longer permits more selectivity in hiring school bus drivers. When selecting bus drivers, companies should focus on the driver's ability to manage students and should verify hard data such as the driver's fingerprints, license, credit, and references. (MLF)

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TALK TO THE NATIONAL SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION
BY Stuart A. Copans, M.D., and Christina Gibbons, M.A.

Anchorage, Alaska
July 16, 1984

First, I would like to thank those who were so helpful during our research; in particular, John Loeb; Roger Welch; Seth Corwin and Karen Finkel. I would like to particularly thank John. It takes a great deal of courage, not only to talk to a child psychiatrist, but in fact to let him ride your school buses regularly.

As some of you know, Christina Gibbons and myself have been studying bus drivers and how they deal with children for the past year. In fact, we have been riding buses for over five years, looking at children's behaviors on the buses but this year represented much more intensive investigation. Our goals for this year were the following:

First: To develop interview aids that would help company managers select bus drivers able to deal effectively with students, parents and school personnel.

Second: To develop suggestions and guidelines for pre-service training and in-service training, again focused on helping drivers deal with the students on their buses.

Third: To provide some guidance for supervisors about how to assess and deal with pupil management problems on the buses they are responsible for.

The full report of our results and recommendations will be published in your NSTA magazine. If there is time, I would like to come back and review some of our main recommendations but first, I would like to share with you some more general observations that I have made over the past year.

Some of these observations will be things you know, some may be things you know so well that you don't think about them anymore -- and hopefully, some will be things that you haven't thought about, but need to.

One of the things I sometimes do to help myself relax is read joke books. Last week, in the midst of a collection of one liners, I found the following quotation: "If you really want an education, ride a school bus". That certainly fits with my experience over the past several years and in particular over the past year. In many ways my education about buses and busing is still just beginning. One thing, however, that has become clear to me is that school busing is an important and often overlooked part of American education.

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When you realize that well over 50% of public school students ride school buses, that over 20 million students ride nearly 3 billion miles every year, that nearly 4 billion dollars per year (over 4% of the public school budget) is spent on busing, you realize how important your industry is.

In fact, the percentage of the education budget spent on bus transportation varies tremendously from state to state, from less than 2% to nearly 8% -- and from less than $120 to over $280 per pupil transported.

The laws regarding busing also vary greatly from state to state as does the mix of private contractors and publicly run systems.

My bet is that, despite my research, you still know more about the complexities of your industry than I do, and you probably are even more bothered than I am by the fact that the School Bus Industry is so often overlooked (although for some you that may at times be a relief as well).

Recently, the University of Vermont Alumni Magazine devoted a whole issue to education in Vermont. They used a picture of a school bus as an emblem throughout the magazine but nowhere in the magazine did they even mention school-busing and its strengths or its problems.

On the basis of my readings, studies and discussions over the past year, there are two general points that seem important.

First, current selection and training procedures for bus drivers generally ignore issues of pupil management. The large federal study on the hiring of school bus drivers devoted almost no attention to issues of pupil management. In one state, the manual for school bus drivers devotes 1 page out of 77 to pupil management. In Vermont, roughly 1½ hours out of the required 12 hours of training are devoted to issues of pupil management. Pupil management generally is not a focus and has not been a focus in the hiring or training of bus drivers.

My second general point, and this is the point I hope you take home from my talk today is that focusing on pupil management issues in the selection, training and supervision of drivers can have a number of beneficial effects for a company.

A. Increased pupil satisfaction.
B. Decreased vandalism.
C. Decreased accidents.
D. Decreased driver turnover.

E. Decreased injuries.
   1) On the bus.
   2) Off the bus.
F. Decreased liability.
G. Decreased insurance costs.
H. Competitive advantage in bidding for contracts because of:
   1) Better safety record.
   2) Better recommendations.
   3) Lower costs.

I would like to go through these points one at a time.

First: Increased pupil satisfaction. Riding the buses, one of things that was clear to us was that a well-run bus is enjoyed more by students than a poorly run bus, and that generally when a bus is out of control, students are not happy. Although a small group of students may enjoy the opportunity to be out of control without consequences, by and large, pupils are more comfortable when they are made to behave.

Secondly: Decreased vandalism. In talking with a number of bus drivers and fleet owners, it seemed clear that drivers who maintain discipline on their buses and maintain a good relationship with their students have less vandalism on their buses.

Third: Decreased accidents. In one of the few articles, focusing on issues of behavior on buses, it was suggested that a significant number of accidents are due to out-of-control behavior on the part of the students. In fact, this Spring while I was on vacation in South Carolina, I read in the newspaper of two incidents in which students were run over by school buses and killed. In both cases, they were run over because the bus driver was distracted by out-of-control behavior in the back of the bus. Proper training of bus dribers to deal with student behavior might well have prevented these two deaths.

Fourth: Driver turnover. Studies suggest that 25% or more drivers who resign, stop driving because of their inability to manage student behavior. Proper selection and training of drivers to manage student behavior should lead to a decrease in driver turnover and a greater pool of well-trained stable drivers. This would enable companies to be more selective in their hiring since they will have to hire for fewer positions. It should also decrease Accidents since new drivers have more accidents.

Fifth: Decreased injury: Maintenance of proper behavior on buses can lead to fewer injuries on buses through decreasing out-of-control behavior. In addition, our observations seem to suggest that behavior on a bus tends to continue after students get off the bus. That is, if students behave on the bus, they are less likely to get into fights when they get off the bus. This is particularly important because recent suits suggest that lawyers will be trying to hold school bus companies liable for student behavior off buses.

Sixth: Decreased liability.
Recent suits in which bus companies have been sued because children were picked on while riding the bus or because children were beaten up by other children after getting off the bus suggests that proper training of drivers in issues of pupil management can significantly help a company both prevent some of the incidents that lead to suits but also be more able to defend themselves in court, if, in fact, a suit occurs.

Seventh: Decreased insurance costs. If, in fact, my analysis is correct and training in pupil management can help reduce accidents, injuries and liabilities, insurance which is based on past experiences should eventually be lower for companies that provide proper training for their drivers around issues of pupil management.

A COMPETETIVE ADVANTAGE:

Eighth: Finally, it is my belief that proper attention to driver training around issues of pupil management can give a company a significant competitive advantage in competing for contracts. This would be true first because of a better safety record. Second because of better recommendations and greater satisfaction on the part of the school, school administrator and parents. Third, because I believe that proper training of drivers in pupil management techniques should lower costs.

I would now like to go on to briefly discuss some of our recommendations:

First: Selection. It is our recommendation that when selecting bus drivers, you interview them and focus on their bility to manage students. In interviewing, we would recommend the use of critical incidents; that is, asking the drivers how they would deal with some typical situations that are likely to occur on the bus. In our full report, we described how to collect such incidents, how to evaluate what are typical incidents for your company and how to use these incidents in interviews.

It is important to remember, however, that being able to precisely evaluate applicants is of no use if you have to hire everyone wno applies.

Second: This is a point I have made before, but it is worth restating: Keeping your good employees around longer permits you to be selective.

Third: You need to check hard data, such as finger print checks, drivers license checks, credit checks and reference checks to protect yourself against liability. In one case in the child psychiatry literature, a school bus driver sexually molested the children on his bus. The driver, it was later learned, had been previously prosecuted for such offenses. If you do not carry out an adequate check on the people you hire, you may put children at risk and also may put yourself at a tremendous risk of liability. In some cases, state laws limit what you can ask about a prospective employee and this may create a dilemna.

Fourth: Use initial training sessions both for training and for further selection.

TRAINING:

We recommend significant changes in training which I hope the Association will lobby for at State and National levels. Our primary goal is that driver training focus not just on issues of driving and servicing the bus but focus in a much more significant way on issues of pupil management.

It is our recommendation that bus drivers be required to take a minimum of 8 hours of initial training and 4 to 8 hours of yearly training in pupil management and that at least 1/3 of total training time focus around issues of managing student behavior.

Clearly, this will represent a big change for some of your companies and for the industry as a whole.

Our other recommendation is that trainers learn how training is done. One of my professors once told me that in training you should never talk longer than you can make love. At this point, people may feel I am either bragging or lying. In fact, I am not training you right now, I am giving a lecture and the requirements are somewhat different.

One of the things that was clear from interviewing bus drivers is that often training is not done in a way that keeps them alert, involved and interested. Often when we would ask them why they were doing something, or for example, whether they had ever had any instruction around how to deal with disruptive students at a bus stop, they would say, "Well, I remember there was a film we saw on bus stops but I didn't pay much attention to it."

If you are going to train bus drivers, you have got to keep them alert and involved. In our experience, the best way to do that is to make sure they are talking about the problems that are important to them and they encounter in their daily work as bus drivers. What this means is that while initial training is important, ongoing training certainly is more important. In addition, it suggests that initial training might be made better by involving actual bus drivers in the training of those who are to become bus drivers.

Finally, having hopefully convinced you all of the importance of training your drivers in Pupil Management, I would like to suggest that setting up such a program does not have to be expensive. You all have Training Programs already. You all have some skilled bus drivers and you all have an ongoing relationship with one or more school systems that might be willing to help run a workshop for bus drivers.

In our report, I presented an outline on the course Christina and I developed to teach Pupil Management Skills to bus drivers - but I would encourage you to feel free to develop your own approach.

Thank you for your interest and support.

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